

How Teachers Can Help Curb a Dangerous Trend among America's Youth

Classrooms are often filled with products that are used for art projects or other positive activities. However, some of these seemingly harmless products can be dangerous when they are concentrated or intentionally misused. Inhalant use is the deliberate breathing of gases or vapors for their intoxicating effects, and it is an alarming trend among American youth. Because of their accessibility, inhalants are often the first substance children try, and although 5% of parents believe their children have experimented with inhalants, in reality 20% of children have actually tried them. Inhalants can cause death, whether it is the first time an individual has used an inhalant or if they use more than once.

One substance with potential for abuse is helium. Although helium is not directly poisonous, it is harmful because it acts as an asphyxiant. This means that the gas displaces oxygen in the air that is inhaled, causing the person to suffer from the ill effects of oxygen deprivation. Depending how helium is inhaled, the method can exert extreme pressure on the lungs, causing them to rupture.

Teachers and other youth-serving professionals can help to protect children and adolescents from the risks of inhalants. One step is to use water-based and non-aerosol products whenever possible. If alternative products are unavailable, potential inhalants should be stored in a secure place, and rooms should be well-ventilated during the use of the products. The MA Inhalant Abuse Task Force provides more information and tips for teachers at <http://mass.gov/dph/inhalant/whাতেa.htm>.

A second step is to know the signs of potential use. Chemical smells on the child's breath or clothing, paint stains on the face or hands, and empty aerosol cans are a few indications of a problem. The MA Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline (1-800-327-5050 or www.helpline-online.com) is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, if one is concerned about the potential of abuse. In addition, MA Department of Public Health substance abuse prevention materials, including inhalant information specifically for youth-serving professionals, can be ordered in bulk and for free from the Massachusetts Health Promotions Clearinghouse at www.maclearinghouse.com or by phone at 1-800-952-6637.

A third way to help protect youth is by talking to them about how poisonous inhalants are without telling them how to use the substances. The MA Inhalant Abuse Task Force sponsors a brief online training for parents, guardians, and other adults interested in protecting their children from inhalant abuse (www.inhalantabusetraining.org). The training includes tips on how to talk to youth about the dangers of inhalant use. Teachers and other youth-serving professionals have a great impact in a youth's well-being. By actively promoting student's health, teachers can help youth live happier, healthier lives.

Bureau of Substance Abuse Services MA Department of Public Health